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ABSTRACT

This brief paper reports on a study of learning disabilities in students with deafness. The study attempted to first determine to what extent deficiencies in communication skills affect the screening of deaf students for learning disabilities and, second, to describe the phenomenon of learning disability in students with deafness. The research group consisted of 68 pupils (ages 8 to 12) with normal nonverbal IQ and severe hearing loss. Evaluation of communication skills identified a subgroup with very poor communication skills, the atypical learning disabled group, with the following characteristics: (1) more males than females; (2) a tendency to be older than same-class peers; (3) higher incidence of significant medical problems; (4) weak mother-child relationships suggesting a negative educational climate; (5) weak scholastic achievement; (6) low motivation and a weak risk attitude; (7) weak visual perception and integration processes; (8) preference for visual communication; (9) weak signing skills; and (10) passive activity level and low concentration. (DB)

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The Deaf Pupil with Learning Disabilities.

E. Van Vuuren

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THE DEAF PUPIL WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

1. RELEVANCE

Over the past 20 to 30 years professional people working with deaf pupils became more aware of the fact that many deaf pupils manifest learning disabilities on top of learning problems embedded in deafness as such.

Although the exclusion factor in definitions of learning disabilities normally excludes deaf children, it doesn't deny the fact that deaf children could be defined as learning disabled. Kirk and Gallagher (1983 in Powers, Elliot and Funderburg 1987) stated it as follows: "The exclusion factor does not mean that children with hearing and vision impairment or children who are diagnosed as mentally retarded cannot also have learning disabilities".

2. DEPARTURE POINT FOR RESEARCH

A child's deafness particularly gains prominence as a disability in a situation which requires him to use language and to communicate. Because of the inadequacy of his auditory modality, he cannot acquire, possess and check enough information to ensure normal development of his language and communication skills. Therefore one of the deaf child's most serious problems lies in the area of language development and communication, which are in acoustic-orientated environments dependant upon speech reading, reading, speech and writing skills in particular.

When a deaf pupil, however, experiences additional learning disabilities over and above these typical communication disabilities and does not achieve what can be expected of him, bearing in mind the limitations caused by his deafness,

he can be termed as an atypical learning disabled deaf pupil.

The definition for specific learning disability for the hearing is however not directly applicable to the deaf pupil and there is no alternative definition available. This further complicates identification and provision of orthopedagogical help to such pupils.

3. THE RESEARCH

The research done firstly aimed at dertermining to what extent deficiencies in communication skills as mentioned can contribute towards screening deaf pupils for atypical learning disability. The second primary aim was to come to a more precise description of this phenomenon.

The research group consisted of 68 deaf pupils between 8 and 12 years of age, with a non-verbal IQ of more than 90 and a minimum hearing loss of more that 90 decibels in the best ear.

Firstly the research group's communication skills were evaluated by means of evaluation scales and the results statiscally analysed. The statistical analysis devided the group into two distinct groups, namely those with very poor communication skills (called atypical learning disabled), and those with better skills (called the control group).

Biographical questionaires were also completed for both groups and correlations were drawn through statistical analysis. From this a clearer picture of the atypical learning disabled deaf pupil was obtained.

4. RESULTS

It was found that the atypical learning disabled deaf pupil experienced problems in a number of areas, which correlated to a large extent with research done in America.

The following ten major caracteristics of the deaf pupil with learning disabilities emerged from the research:

4.1 More deaf boys than girls:

This fact correlates with the hearing. It is of major importance in planning courses in schools and training centres. Because of the big language problems that could be expected with these deaf boys, the courses structured for them should be job-orientated and more emphasis should be laid on hand skills than language skills. Apparatus and staff provisions should be geared to make provision for more boys than girls in these fields.

4.2 Learning disabled deaf children are older that the rest of the class:

The higher chronological age of the learning disabled children is in many cases the result of late enrolment in a school setting or slower movement through the different phases.

4.3 Medical problems are more prominent:

Not only were more medical problems, and especially at birth, present in the learning disabled deaf children, but most of these problems would probably lead to damage done to the nervous system. This could lead to neuropsychological dysfunctions, which lies most probably at the basis of the

learning disability. Neuropsychological testing of all deaf children is therefore of the utmost importance.

4.4 A negative educational climate is prominent:

In all cases a weak mother-child relationship was found. All deaf children are extremely dependent on a positive educational climate where they can feel safe and catered for, where they could be intentionally stimulated and their learning skills could be fully developed. Specific guidance to parents of young deaf children is therefore of the utmost importance to counter learning problems.

4.5 Scholastic achievements are weaker:

As could be expected, the learning disabled deaf child's scholastic achievement is much weaker than the rest of the class. His repeated experiences of failure could influence his selfimage negatively and also his total development.

Learning disabled deaf children do have specific educational needs in terms of communication, tempo and orthodidactical measures. It would therefore be advisable to group them seperately where they could progress on their own tempo and would also taste the experience of success.

The learning disabled deaf child is expecially weak in language, but have good skills in Maths, according to the research. This emphasise the care with which career guidance must be done in their cases.

4.6 Low motivation and weak risk attitude:

These children show a low motivation level and a weak risk attitude. This has a cycle-effect of cause and result which

is negative for general as well as scholastic progress.

4.7 Visual perpection and visual integration processes:

These processes are weak and have negative effects on speechreading, writing, etc. Special care must be taken to accommodate these children's slower tempo in the classroom, as well as numerous mistakes that could be made.

4.8 Learning disabled deaf children prefer visual communicatiion:

The learning disabled deaf child doesn't get enough information by means of amplification of the auditory modality or speechreading to enable them to communicate and learn successfully. They need and also prefer visual communication like signing and finger spelling. This need must be catered for, even in an oral-aural school setting.

4.9 Learning disabled deaf children have weaker skills in signing:

Although they prefer signing, their skills were not as good as the rest of the group. Therefore one cannot accept that when sign language is used, they will always be able to understand. This complicates rendering help to these children and emphasizes the fact that what they understand, must be monitored step by step. Basic written communication like speech balloons will be of great help as well as the use of the computer for older children.

4.10 Activity level and concentration:

These two factors were the two most prominent factors by

means of which the learning disabled deaf child could be identified.

The majority of the learning disabled deaf children were hipokinetic (passive). They were not intentionally focussed on language development and therefore missed a lot of opportunities. As a result they do not develop a medium by means of which they can learn.

These children also suffered from a lack of concentration. It is very difficult for these children to concentrate on one stimulus, they are extremely receptive for non-relevent stimuli and find it difficult to select the appropriate stimuli. Such a situation could have serious negative effects on a deaf child's speechreading process. To be able to speechread correctly, intense concentration is needed and the speechreader must be able to use the minimum clues to get the total message. This is very difficult for the learning disabled deaf child, and he will make a lot of mistakes.

5. CONCLUSION

When the majority of the above mentioned 10 factors are prominent in a deaf child, it could be a good indication that such a child is at high risk to suffer from learning disabilities. They must be seen as a group of deaf children who needs special attention and care, and specific planning must be done for them.

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